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SUBJECT: Thai Government, Private Sector, and NGOs Engage on
Trafficking in Fishing Industry

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¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: Minister of Social Development and Human Security Issara Somchai provided opening remarks March 25 at a NGO-organized seminar on the problem of human trafficking in the deep sea fishing industry. The Minister's participation, along with that of multiple police officials and representatives from the Ministries of Labor and Foreign Affairs, signaled the Royal Thai Government's (RTG) recognition of the seriousness of the problem. Private fishing industry representatives also attended the seminar, allowing the proceedings to go beyond simple venting that sometimes characterizes conferences attended only by civil society representatives and social workers. The participation of private sector representatives contributed to the growing dialogue among all stakeholders on how to best combat the problem of human trafficking in the fishing industry. End summary and comment.

¶2. (U) Laboff attended a March 25 seminar on human trafficking (TIP) in the deep sea fishing industry, organized by the non-governmental Mirror Foundation and financed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (NOTE: According to its website, the non-profit Mirror Foundation, originally established to provide broad assistance to ethnic minority "hill tribe" people in northern Thailand, has expanded activities to provide assistance to human trafficking victims. End Note). The approximately 75 participants in the seminar represented various civil society organizations (NGOs), the Royal Thai Government's (RTG) Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Twenty-nine representatives from the Ministry of Labor's (MOL) provincial-level offices in areas known to be source and destination areas for fishing industry workers also attended. Importantly, the private fishing industry was also present, represented by Titikorn Lohakoo, Secretary General of the Fishing Association of Thailand, and Aphisit Techanitiswat, President of the Deep Sea Fishing Association.

¶3. (SBU) In an showing of the seriousness with which the RTG takes the issue, Minister of Social Development and Human Security Issara Somchai provided opening remarks with a message of commitment to prevent and to combat human trafficking in the fishing industry. He told the audience that at the Anti-TIP Committee (ATP) meeting chaired by the Prime Minister on February 23, the committee agreed to set up a working group to look specifically at TIP in the fishing industry. Wanlop Phloytabtim, the Permanent Secretary of MSDHS, also spoke, emphasizing that the RTG recognizes the potential for TIP in the industry. He noted that the RTG understands the seriousness of the problem and said that Thai laborers usually shun fishing jobs due to the difficult and sometimes dangerous nature of the work. Wanlop explained that this generates a demand for foreign workers in the industry who are often vulnerable to exploitation by labor

brokers willing to engage in trafficking.

14. (SBU) Two panel discussions with representatives from the private sector, NGOs, police, MSDHS, and MOL followed, generating discussion during a question and answer session. Interesting points included those made by a representative from the Mirror Foundation:

- Most of the Foundation's cases of missing persons involve laborers from deep sea fishing vessels.
- Most TIP victims from the deep sea fishing industry assisted by the Foundation were lured to work on vessels with a promise of high wages. If their vessel's crew failed to catch enough fish to make a profit, captains sometimes declined to pay workers.
- Payments to workers usually entail fixed payments and payments made through profit sharing agreements.

He pointed out what he considers key obstacles to the protection of worker rights in the deep sea fishing industry:

- The Labor Protection Act does not provide protection to laborers on oceanic fishing vessels who continuously work outside of Thailand (e.g. in international waters) for more than one year. Workers in the fishing industry do not have access to the government social security system. (NOTE: Pornchai Yooprayong, the Deputy Permanent Secretary of the MOL, (one of the panelists) stated he would study the suggestion that the Labor Protection Act be revised to address this problem. End Note).
- Most workers on fishing boats are migrants or poorly-educated Thais who do not have knowledge of relevant laws or their rights. Generally poor, they are often more interested in finding work, even after being victimized, than assisting authorities with prosecution efforts.

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- Checks of vessels prior to their departure (by Immigration police, Customs officials, Public Health officers, etc.) are not rigorously carried out.

15. (SBU) In addition, an ILO representative stated that one-third of the child labor cases in which it provides assistance involve the fishing and fishing-related industries. A representative from the MFA commented on the difficulty of coordinating with other nations to assist Thai TIP victims abroad and explained that many governments view TIP victims as illegal migrants who should be penalized, not aided. The Secretary General of the Fishing Association of Thailand noted that while TIP victims are sometimes found on deep sea vessels, they are generally not found on day-fishing boats, which generally employ Thai laborers. While stating he recognizes the problem of TIP in his industry, the President of the Deep Sea Fishing Association suggested the government should provide assistance to boat owners to defray costs (even if this implied increased regulation) so that owners do not need to rely on cheap labor to turn a profit.